

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



Volume 7, Issue 2, February 2019

www.ijellh.com

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The Haunting Beloved

Abstract: Literature and other forms of art have brought into light the sufferings that the Black people went through highlighting its effects on the body, mind and soul of the Black people. Toni Morrison's fifth novel *Beloved* deals with a similar theme. It shows how slavery adversely affected a race, through a fictional character named Sethe, who was inspired by a real life figure Margaret Garner. Garner killed her children to save them from slavery. Morrison's novel revolves around a similar theme. The lead character Sethe kills her daughter to save her from slavery and its bitter experiences. However in Morrison's novel the dead daughter returns to Sethe's life. The intention of this paper is to analyse the novel using Freud's Trauma Theory, in order to show that the daughter who returned is the trauma of Sethe's mind revisiting her, asking for recognition and adjustment to what happened in the past. It also analyses how such a condition of Sethe's mind affected the rest of the family including her sons, mother in law, her daughter and the new male presence in her life named Paul D and her social relationships.

Key Terms: Trauma, Trauma Theory, racism, Black- American sufferings, *Beloved*, ghost.

Harold Bloom in his introduction to *Viva Modern Critical Interpretations: Toni Morrison's Beloved* comments,

Of all Morrison's novels, it [*Beloved*] puzzles me most: the style is remarkably adroit, baroque in its splendour, and the authority of the narrative is firmly established. The characters are problematic for me; unlike the protagonists of Morrison's earlier novels, they suggest ideograms. I think that is because *Beloved* is a powerfully tendentious romance; it has too clear a design upon its readers, of whatever race and gender. (1)

Bloom's comment on the impact of *Beloved* on its readers signifies the cultural importance of this neo-slave narrative. Toni Morrison's fifth novel *Beloved* is a narration of the haunting experiences and its after effects that a slave woman named Sethe had to go through. The novel is inspired by the real life story of a woman named Margaret Garner, who killed her child deciding that death is a better alternative than slavery for her children. This incident threw light on the terrible condition of the slaves even during the civil war which ensured their emancipation. The novel which is set in a country side near Cincinnati, Ohio, deals with the story of a former slave, Sethe. Sethe who lived a peaceful life as a slave in a plantation named Sweet Home, began to find it a gruesome existence after the death of her employer Mr. Garner and a change of ownership into the hands of someone whom the slaves addressed as the schoolteacher. Though Sethe and her husband Halle along with few others decide to run away from there, only Sethe and her children made it. Later when the school teacher came to collect her and her children from the house of her mother-in-law, in a desperate attempt to save her children she tries to cut the throat of three of her children and hauled one at the wall to kill it. Though three of her children survived the murder attempt, one of her daughters died. The novel also portrays how the dead child's ghost which had been haunting Sethe's home 124 and how it disappears with the coming of the character Paul D

only to reappear in the physical form of a young woman who called herself Beloved.

Beloved's influence on Sethe and the problems that it creates in her relationship with herself as well as that with others constitute the plot of the novel.

The life of a former slave does not lack trauma. Almost all the characters in the novel undergo some sort of mental struggle. While Sethe's mother in law Baby Suggs had to survive the trauma of being physically and mentally abused, her husband Halle undergoes the trauma of having to watch his wife being abused without being able to resist it. The character Paul D undergoes several tortures which were reserved for the slaves during that period along with the death of many of his friends and brothers, whereas Stamp Paid was constantly cuckolded by his white master. But the most notable suffering throughout the novel is that of Sethe, who was left with a scar that seemed like a tree on her back. Sethe's trauma of slavery is so huge that in her motherly love she chose to murder her children rather than leave them to live the life that she did.

There are several instances in the novel that show Sethe's mental agony and how she was being haunted by her past. Slavery is one of the primary causes of Sethe's trauma. It is one of the important reasons for the traumatized minds of several of the novel's characters. Though Sethe's life at Sweet Home was peaceful when Mr. Garner was alive, this soon changed with his death and the fallen health of Mrs. Garner. The schoolteacher who is Mrs. Garner's brother in law, soon takes up administration of Sweet Home and he proves himself to be a ruthless master. Under the schoolteacher's administration, Sethe and the others were treated brutally and inhumanly. Sethe was treated like an animal and valued only for capacity to breed. The inconsideration one human being has for another is startling. Morrison gives a glimpse of the schoolteacher's mind when he comes to fetch Sethe and her children. Morrison narrates:

Right off it was clear, to school teacher especially, that there was nothing there

to claim. The three (now four-because she'd had the one coming when she cut) pickaninnies they had hoped were alive and to take back to Kentucky, take back and raise properly to do the work Sweet Home desperately needed, were not. Two were lying open-eyed in saw-dust; a third pumped blood down the dress of the main one-the woman schoolteacher bragged about, the one he said made fine ink, damn good soup, pressed his collars the way he liked besides having ten breeding years left. (184)

This shows what the schoolteacher witnessed and what his reaction to it was. He witnessed a murder and a murder which is so abnormal, yet he expresses only his remorse at having lost a fine breeding woman and few slaves. Slavery and the schoolteacher left a huge fissure in the psyche of Sethe, that her past completely altered her present as Helena Austine notes in her "The Persistence of Memory: Slavery and Trauma in Tony Morrison's *Beloved*", "Traumatized by the manifold atrocities of slavery (displacement, isolation, oppression, violence), Sethe's own memories are a constant source of re-injury, and her unresolved pain manifests in an anguished consciousness and a "haunted" present" (1).

Sethe attempts to confess to Paul D about her murder. Paul D expecting the best looks at Sethe for answers and found only that she was going around him. "Circling him the way she was circling the subject" (Morrison 197). Referring to this Linda Krumholz in her essay titled "The Ghost of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" points out, "Sethe's spinning motion around the room, around her subject, describes the necessity for approaching the unutterably painful history of slavery through oblique, fragmented, and personal glimpses of the past- that is , through means most often associated with fiction" (94). Sethe's inability to go back to the past is a result of the scars which were left in her mind by slavery. The tree on her back is a physical manifestation. It acts as the symbol that reminds Sethe of her traumatizing past. The scar stands for the scar that slavery left in her

mind.

The first and the most important element that shows this is the presence of the ghost in the beginning of the novel and the later appearance of Beloved. The novel begins with the sentence “124 was spiteful. Full of baby’s venom” (Morrison 3). This shows the condition in which Sethe was living in after the murder of her child. If the death of her child could be viewed as the traumatic stressor that she underwent, the presence of the ghost becomes the result of that trauma. As Margaret Atwood points out in her essay “Haunted by their Nightmares”, “The supernatural element is treated, not in an “Amityville Horror,” watch-me-make-your-flesh-creep mode, but with a magnificent practicality, like the ghost of Catherine Earnshaw in *Wuthering Hieghts*” (6). The effect of the mental trauma is experienced physically by Sethe and her family through the presence of this ghost. As Bertha is defined as Jane Eyre’s suppressed-oppressed self, similarly, the ghost could be a manifestation of Sethe’s traumatised self. While Jane’s alternate personality aims at the destruction of a patriarchal system that restrained her, Sethe’s mind seems to desire its revenge on its own self for slaughtering her daughter. In this sense the house too could become a symbol for Sethe’s mind and the restlessness of the house could be the restlessness of Sethe’s mind. Denver at one point remembers Sethe as the reason for her brothers’ elopement and not the baby’s ghost. “She [Sethe] missed killing my brothers and they knew it. ... May be it was getting that close to dying that made them want to fight the War” (252). With the arrival of Paul D and the possibility of a new life, the ghost or Sethe’s mind reacted violently and Paul D reacts to the ghost with equal violence.

It took him [Paul D] a while to realize that his legs were not shaking because of worry, but because the floorboards were and the grinding, shoving floor was only part of it. The house itself was pitching. ...

“God damn it! Hush up!” Paul D was shouting, falling, and reaching for anchor. “Leave the place alone! Get the hell out!” a table rushed toward him and he grabbed its leg. Somehow he managed to stand at an angle and holding the table by two legs, he bashed it about, wrecking everything, screaming back at the screaming house. “You want to fight, come on! God damn it! She got enough without you. She got enough!” (Morrison 22)

Roger Sale connects Paul D with the ghost and the memories of Sethe. In the essay “Morrison’s *Beloved*” he points out, “... when Paul D comes to 124, he senses immediately that the house is spiteful, haunted with rememory, though he is told little about the baby’s venom. Dedicated to killing the past, he exorcises the ghost of the house ...” (14). Thus Paul D acts as the agent of perhaps curing Sethe of her madness.

Though the ghost seems to have left after Paul D’s violent outburst, a few days later *Beloved* appeared. *Beloved* is portrayed as a twenty years old woman. “She had new skin, lineless and smooth, including the knuckles of her hands” (62) and she has no memory about her past. And *Beloved* hates Paul D and views him as someone who stands between herself and Sethe. *Beloved*’s rise from the stream could be considered as the return of Sethe’s traumatic memories, this time in a more concrete form. If Paul D is the anchor of Sethe’s swaying mind, *Beloved* becomes the experiences which were experienced but not registered. It is also to be noted that while the ghost was invisible and mostly intangible, *Beloved* has a physical form and more ‘presence’ in the lives of the novel’s characters. Though Paul D could chase away the ghost, he seemed to have brought with him the memories and repugnant encounters that Sethe experienced at Sweet Home in the past, with him and they seem to have taken their form in *Beloved*. As Marilyn Sanders Mobley notes in her essay “A Different Remembering: Memory, History, and Meaning in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*”, “... his [Paul D’s] arrival initiates the painful plunge into the past through the sharing of their individual

stories, memories and experiences” (21). The presence of Beloved has rather adverse effect on Sethe. Beloved becomes the lock and key to Sethe’s past which she kept hidden even from her eighteen years old daughter. If Beloved could be called Sethe’s nightmare, it is this nightmare that leads her to reliving her past. The second section of this three part novel consists of four monologues. The first one is that of Sethe, the second one is by Denver, the third one is that of Beloved and the fourth one is a merging of the monologues of these three characters. Mobley suggests that “in the last interior “dialogue,” the voices of Sethe, Denver and Beloved blend to suggest not only that it is always now, but to suggest that the past present and future are all one and the same” (24). Thus establishing the undeniable connection between Sethe and the traumatic place that Beloved has in the life of Sethe and through her in the life of Denver.

Towards the end of the novel, Beloved can be seen to be demanding excessive attention from Sethe particularly. She extends it even to the point of being haunting.

Sethe was licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved’s eyes. Like a familiar, she hovered, never leaving the room Sethe was in unless required and told to. She rose early in the dark to be there, waiting in the kitchen when Sethe came down to make fast bread before she left for work. ... she was in the window at two when Sethe returned, or in the doorway; then the porch, its steps, the path, the road, till finally, surrendering to the habit, Beloved began inching down Bluestone Road further and further each day to meet Sethe and walk her back to 124. (71)

If Beloved is to be regarded as the trauma of Sethe’s mind, then it becomes clear that Beloved’s existence is possible only within the sphere of Sethe’s mind. Therefore the curing of Sethe’s mind will lead to the destruction of Beloved. Thus Paul D becomes the villain in Beloved’s life, because Paul D has the capability to cure Sethe of her trauma and offer her a

new life, hence Sethe might not think of Beloved as much as she needs Sethe to think. This becomes evident when there is a possibility that Sethe and Paul D might have a future together. When Beloved understands that her body begins to fall apart. On the day it became apparent that Sethe and Paul D might stay together for a longer period than she had anticipated, sitting on the kitchen table with Denver, Beloved pulled out a back tooth.

Beloved looked at the tooth and thought, This is it. Next would be her arm, her hand, a toe. Pieces of her would drop maybe one at a time, maybe all at once. Or on one of those mornings before Denver woke and after Sethe left she would fly apart. It is difficult keeping her head on her neck, her legs attached to her hips when she is by herself. ... When her tooth came out- an odd fragment, last in the row- she thought it was starting. (164)

It is Sethe's mind and attention that is feeding Beloved. Toward the end of the novel when Sethe recognizes and accepts Beloved as her dead daughter, Beloved finally gains her upper hand over Sethe's mind and thus begins Sethe's physical as well as mental fall while Beloved grows more and fatter. Susan Bowers connects Sethe, Beloved and the trauma of slavery by pointing out that "the invasion of the world of the living by Beloved's physical presence is evidence of the terrible destruction of the natural order caused by slavery" (34-35). Here slavery becomes an unnatural event that facilitates the unnatural event of a mother killing her own child and the child returning as an adult to haunt its mother's conscience. Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos in her essay "Maternal Bonds as Devourers of Women's Individuation in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" points out that Sethe's trauma is greatly connected to maternity. She puts forward the opinion that Sethe carries Beloved on her conscience and in her heart. For the mother the dead child is maternity in potentia, the mother truncated" (73). Beloved makes use of Sethe's maternal sentiments and exploits her mentally. Here again the presence of Paul D becomes significant. Paul D uproots Sethe from her role

solely as a mother and rejuvenates the romantic emotions within her. Thus giving her the emotional identity of both a mother and a lover. Demetrakopoulos points out,

Perhaps a woman who forever defines herself through her maternal bond remains forever caught in the matrix of nature-indeed becomes part of the matrix of nature. When Sethe finally connects with Paul D, she moves towards individuation, becomes connected with her own animus energy and, thus, assumes a position from which she can escape the deadly toils of nature. (73)

These deadly toils of nature are the traumatic experiences that she goes through in her tragic past.

Another cause of Sethe's trauma could be her guilt over the murder of her daughter. Her over protectiveness of Denver and even her acceptance of Beloved as her responsibility when they first find her seems to have stemmed from this. During one of her conversations she argues with Paul D "I stopped him, staring at the place where the fence used to be. I took and put my baby's where they would be safe" (Morrison 201), yet deep down Sethe is afraid that what she did is wrong. She tries to soothe the baby's ghost by explaining to it why she had murdered it and for that she and Denver hold their hands and try to summon the baby's ghost. When they fail to do so, she remarks, "she wasn't even two years old when she died. Too little to understand. Too little to talk much even" (Morrison 5). Paul D had managed to veil Sethe's feeling of guilt through desire. David Lawrence in his essay "Fleshly Ghosts and Ghostly Flesh: The Word and the Body in *Beloved*" observes, "In his presence, Sethe rediscovers her own capacity for bodily sensation and reestablishes contact with the outside world that induces such sensation ... " (51). Beloved's arrival rekindled within the mind of Sethe the feeling of guilt. The meeting of Beloved and Sethe is very symbolic in that sense. When Sethe first meets Beloved her urinary bladder breaks and she compares her urination to breaking the amniotic sac that she had experienced while she gave birth to Denver.

Since Paul D had been acting as the factor that protected Sethe from herself, only after the complete withdrawal of Paul D from Sethe does Beloved's plan to completely destroy Sethe is accomplished. Though Beloved attempts to choke Sethe while they are at the clearing, Beloved fails to execute it completely. However her second attempt to trouble Sethe by affecting her mind is almost a success. With of Paul D leaving from 124, Sethe's acceptance of Beloved as her dead child and Sethe's belief "she ain't even mad at me. Not a bit" (223), Beloved begins her venomous plan against Sethe. Beloved accuses Sethe of leaving her behind, abandoning her, of not loving enough and of not smiling at her. Denver observes:

Then the mood changed and arguments began. Slowly at first. A complaint from Beloved, an apology from Sethe. A reduction of pleasure at some special effort the older woman made. ... She took the best of everything-first. The best chair, the biggest piece, the prettiest plate, the brightest ribbon for her hair, and the more she took, the more Sethe began to talk, explain, describe how much she had suffered, been through, for her children ... None of which made the impression it was supposed to. Beloved accused her of leaving her behind. Of not being nice to her, not smiling at her. ... and Sethe cried saying she never did, or meant to- that she had to get them out, away ... That her plan was always that they would all be together on the other side, forever. Beloved was not interested. ... Sethe pleaded for forgiveness, counting, listing, again and again her reasons: that Beloved was more important, meant more to her than her own life. (296)

Beloved becomes more and more malicious. Susan Bowers's points out that Beloved affected the three inhabitants of 124 adversely. Bowers opines, "Sethe realizes that Beloved will never accept her explanation for the murder and that Sethe can never make it up to her" (35-36). When Sethe tries to assert her love for Beloved, the latter reacts violently; she slams things, breaks plates, throws salt on the floor and turns completely evil. Sethe becomes a

complete slave to Beloved and she constantly complains even to the point where Denver began to worry about her mother. In her attempt to satisfy Beloved, Sethe loses her job pushing the family into starvation. On the other hand, Beloved grows more and more. She gains a lot of weight that her belly looks like that of a pregnant woman. Beloved seems to be feeding on Sethe's food as well as her conscience. Being a mother has a lot to do with Sethe's feeling of guilt. Sethe is constantly reminded of her motherhood. She is branded as the savage mother who killed her daughter. Other members of the black community including Paul D view her in that light. Even her own living daughter and her sons were afraid of Sethe because she is a mother who killed her own blood. Sethe herself believes this notion of motherhood where the mother is all sacrificing and selfless. Sethe's guilty conscience is well summed up by Dianne Rosena Jones in her online article titled "Beloved: the Manifestation of Guilt".

Beloved was the manifestation of Sethe's guilt. That explains why Sethe's remorse caused Beloved's spirit to enlarge. Sethe's guilt tormented her and the other children who survived, to the point that two of her sons ran away from home. Her guilt controlled her and destroyed her chance to develop a relationship with Paul D. She became so fixated with feeding her guilt until she refused to eat. Ultimately, if not exorcised, her guilt would have killed her. (1)

In the scene in which the exorcism of Beloved happens is a poignant one. This scene incident shows how devastated and manipulated Sethe had become due to the presence of Beloved. Sethe attempts to murder Mr. Bodwin, the white man who gave Baby Suggs 124. To Sethe, a friend seemed to be an enemy. In her eyes white skin was permanently equated with slavery. With the constant nagging of Beloved this was firmly established. This with her urge to protect her daughter along with the memory of what had happened eighteen years twisted her mind to the point her immediate reaction to seeing a white man is the desire to kill him.

The trauma of her mind is so great that she cannot separate between illusion and reality.

Even after the scene of the exorcism Beloved is not completely cured. She goes through the pain of loss once again. Beloved's influence over her blinded Sethe to the simple realities of life, such as hunger and thirst and what Beloved was doing to her physically and mentally. Her ruptured mind cannot handle the loss of her mind once again. She cries on the shoulder of Paul D for her daughter saying "she was my best thing" (Morrison 335). David Lawrence comments on this situation:

In the aftermath of her baptism, though, Sethe is devastated, her "best thing" taken from her a second time. She has taken a crucial step towards self-ownership in directing her protective violence against the oppressor (schoolteacher in the form of Bodwin) instead of against her own flesh and blood, but, alone she cannot recuperate from the tragic repetition of her loss." (54)

It is Paul D who helps her in finding a solution to the trauma that she experienced and also in escaping the bondage of her past.

Yet another cause of Sethe's trauma is her husband Halle and what happened to him. Halle was the father of all her children, unlike Baby Suggs whose children had different fathers. There existed a deeper intimacy between Halle and Sethe. Because they were a family and they were the only couple among the slaves of Sweet Home. Sethe also held Halle in high regard because Halle for five years worked on his free days to buy his mother her freedom. So the disappearance of Halle had a negative impact on Sethe. Though Sethe and Halle had planned to run away from Sweet Home together, Sethe couldn't find Halle at the appointed place. So she had to leave him behind for her children whom she had sent to 124 and also for the one she was carrying. Later after eighteen years she learns from Paul D that Halle was at the barn when Sethe reached there. But he was hiding on the loft of the barn. He

couldn't get out of there in time. Paul D informs Sethe also that Halle might have witnessed the schoolteacher's nephews misbehaving towards Sethe and forcefully milking her. This savage deed seemed to have disturbed Halle's mind. Paul D tells Sethe "It broke him Sethe". Paul D looked up at her and sighed. "You may as well know it all. Last time I saw him he was sitting by the churn. He had butter all over his face." (Morrison 85) Sethe is badly affected by this knowledge. She constantly contemplates on this. This adds into yet another of her many traumas that she had been through in her life. Sethe even when she thinks about Paul D and what he could mean to her life, she is afraid that he has brought with him another haunting, the face of Halle smeared in butter. She even has nightmares about Halle's face. Sethe thinks about nightmares by saying that she dreamed of her near ones " ... only in their parts in trees" (Morrison 105). But "Now Halle's face between the butter press and the churn swelled larger and larger, crowding her eyes and making her head hurt." (Morrison 105) She also feels that "Now he [Paul D] added more: new pictures and old rememories that broke her heart. Into the empty space of not knowing about Halle ... was filled now with a brand-new sorrow ..." (Morrison 117). It is also to be noted that men also suffer from the violence of slavery. Halle could not bear the sight of his wife being attacked. He feels emasculated by what he witnesses. Paul D gives the right perspective in this matter when he says to Sethe: "A man ain't a goddamn axe. Chopping, hacking, busting every goddamn minute of the day. Things get to him. Things he can't chop down because they are inside." (Morrison 85)

Throughout the novel it can be seen that it is not just Sethe who have been through sufferings of various kinds. While Paul D suffers from what happened in his life during and after his life at Sweet Home, Denver suffers an entirely different sort of trauma. Denver's trauma is caused by her mother. Being just a new born at the time of the murder of her sister by her mother, Denver's version of Sethe's murder is similar to that of the rest of the world. She sees the world through a glass tinted by prejudice. The young girl is so affected by what

she has heard of her mother she refuses to believe in another version. She is scared of her mother and what might happen if similar situation arises once again. She describes about her mother combing her hair.

I try not to cry but it hurts so much to comb it. When she finishes the combing and starts the braiding, I get sleepy. I want to go to sleep but I know if I do I won't wake up. So I have to stay awake while she finishes my hair, then I can sleep. The scary part is waiting for her to come in and do it. Not when she does it, but when I wait for her to. (Morrison 254)

Denver throughout her life has been isolated and lived a life away from peers and the rest of the black community because of the stigma associated with Sethe. The only 'company' that Denver had was the ghost. Even though she lost it with the coming of Paul D, it seemed that he was the door to a new beginning in the life of Denver. However Beloved's presence once again tumbled everything. Denver right away recognises Beloved as her sister and she is afraid that her mother would repeat what had happened eighteen years ago. She is fearfully protective of Beloved. She assumes "This time I have to keep my mother away from her. That's hard, but I have to." (Morrison 253) Denver is so blinded by her love for Beloved that she fails to see her for who she truly is. Even when Beloved attempts to strangle her mother at the clearing, all she can do is to be quite, not taking the side of either one. Only towards the does she fully understand the potential of this devil-child. She sees her mother being a complete slave to Beloved and finds her slowly withering away into a world that is full of remorse, even forgetting her. This is when Denver decides to come out of her trauma and begin seeing her mother in a new light as the victim rather than the culprit. Thus she goes around asking for help and finally aiding in the exorcism of Beloved.

The novel is one of trauma and a woman's fight against a social system that constantly reminds her that she is black and a mother and refuses to understand her life or her

decisions. Yet the novel ends in a positive note. Morrison ends the novel with the reunion of Sethe and Paul D. The readers are left with the feeling that Sethe is finally saved. Denver is also free of the weight that she had been carrying for her whole life. Thus the novel, “In three words or less, it’s a hair-raiser.” (Atwood 5)

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